

RACING BEHIND THE WALL

Horsemen kept on trotting under socialist rule in East Germany

by Ulf Lindström



HISTORIC TRACK: The Karlshorst track in East Berlin still races clockwise today, as it did in this photo from 1956.



"THEY WANTED TO GIVE US STALLIONS FOR FREE, BUT WE WEREN'T ALLOWED TO ACCEPT THEM FROM WEST BERLIN; THEY HAD NO 'SOCIALIST BLOOD,' WE WERE TOLD BY THE MANAGEMENT OF THE TRACK."

Manfred Schulz, 74, was champion amateur driver at Karlshorst racetrack in East Berlin, Germany, for 20 years with a few gaps in the 1960s. As the country celebrates the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall that divided the capitalist western side of the city and the socialist eastern side, those who raced in East Berlin remember their time and troubles racing at the state-controlled racetrack.

"Never, not one single time, was I invited to an official ceremony at which my championships were recognized," Schulz recalled. "The party didn't allow that since I was denied a training license because my parents weren't working class."

Today Schulz has his regular table at what was then West Berlin's Mariendorf, at the Casino café by the southern turn of the track. He keeps his race card and tip sheets neatly arranged in front of him, taking calls on his cell phone from friends who suggest bets for the next race, briefing them on why the previous race didn't go quite as they had expected.



“In the outbound transports to Budapest we stashed money in fodder sacks, then bought tack that was loaded around the horses for the homebound journey. Customs, if the officers cared at all, lost interest in checking if they had to crawl around the horses.”

Manfred Schulz

Sound familiar? Yet to Schulz, everything is new—and old. Harness racing in Berlin has always been marked by politics. For Swedes, Mariendorf is known as the track from where Nazis tried to abduct Big Noon—Menhammar Farm’s founding stallion—after he finished second in the 1942 Matadoren. By then the track had lost its president, Bruno Cassirer (who purchased Walter Dear to stand in Germany after winning the 1929 Hambletonian), who fled to England in 1938.

Mariendorf’s horseflesh was severe-

ly taxed during World War II. More than 100 head, most of them owned by the Jauss Stable, were lost in a conflagration following an Allied bombing raid in 1943. Freed POWs and starving Berliners took their toll across the city after May 1945.

Close to the Casino building, when Schulz was 5 years old, was a prison camp that was later used as stalls for the 40-46 horses that had survived on straw. Trotting now came to stage a preview of the Cold War and the building of the Berlin Wall. The U.S. Army, whose

occupation sector included Mariendorf, banned feeding grain to horses. Still, the Red Army sent veterinarians, troops and vehicles to ship trotters over to the Karlshorst track, under Soviet jurisdiction, for the return of racing on July 1. Tens of thousands of Berliners, perhaps as many as 50,000, flocked to the premiere.

“Why didn’t Schulz flee before the wall went up in August 1961?” one may wonder with the benefit of hindsight.

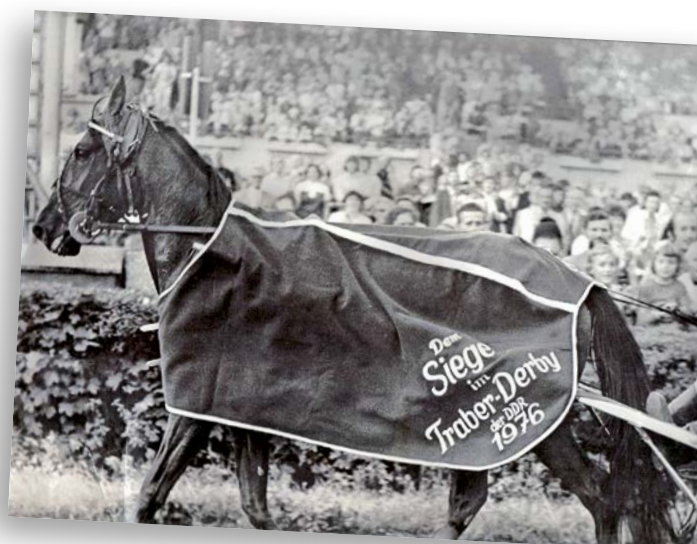
“We had no clue on what was in the offing, at least no clear signals,” said the amateur driver. “I personally was visiting



SURVIVORS OF SOCIALISM: *Clockwise*

from left: Manfred Schulz, 74, won 20 amateur driving championships in East Berlin, but wasn't allowed to compete against Westerners.

• The Karlshorst track in East Berlin today. The West Berlin-based Mariendorf track conducts a regular meet there now. • Roswitha, a filly by Stepp, won the 1976 GDR Derby, East Germany's greatest race.



friends in West Berlin on Saturday, and returned later the same evening.”

A few hours past midnight on Sunday, Aug. 13, all points of transit were blocked by barbed wire and the construction of the wall started. The preparations to close the border were held so secret that not even the guests at party leader Walter Ulbricht's garden party on Saturday night knew about the border closure.

“Perhaps, for a few days afterward, it was possible to get across over into West Berlin, but not with horse transports,” Schulz said impassively.

“This is something people in Sweden don't understand,” said Rolf Hafvenstrom, forgetting that his steamed salmon with vegetables is getting cold. A Swedish fixture of many years on Berlin's racing scene, successful at both tracks, Hafvenstrom is enjoying a meal with his buddies in the cafeteria of the Teehaus, at the top of the stretch of the clockwise Mariendorf track.

“For the horsepeople at Karlshorst in East Berlin, the Moscow track was closer than this one, really, even though

it's only a half-hour by car between the tracks,” he said. “No, it was impossible to maintain contacts across the wall. An East German trainer at Karlshorst who was caught with an old—an old!—race card from Mariendorf risked his license.”

Hafvenstrom said the director at Karlshorst was in trouble if too many races were won by horses in private training. That would make the Ministry of Agriculture summon the management of the track for a scolding, for not having understood the “socialist spirit” of harness racing. Hafvenstrom is



convinced that races were fixed, especially on Sundays when crowds were larger.

"Perhaps not the exact order at finish, but no one was left in doubt about the message to the drivers at the management's roll-call ahead of the first race," he said. "Punters, though, and especially bookmakers outside the track's entrance, were not fooled."

Karlshorst was the only track in East Germany with pari-mutuel races. As such, some 1,500 people would show up on a Sunday during the '60s. For

the East German Derby Day, however, 10,000 people turned out, drawn also by the peculiar German tradition to put on fashion shows at harness racing meets. At the 1988 Derby, the crowd was entertained by the model group "Na Und" or "So What?" Self-irony wasn't exactly the middle-name of the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Private trainers—always four, never fewer or more licenses were granted—and amateur drivers were the favorites of the Karlshorst spectators. Although not

nearly on a similar scale, the sympathies were like those that reflected the political fronts in East Berlin soccer, between the people's Union and Stasi's Dynamo. The attendants at the track knew that, just like in every other sport in the GDR, private competitors were deliberately disadvantaged in favor of those of the state's own teams.

"The private trainers never got fodder with mineral supplements, always the low-end forage hay, and seldom got calls from the vets," said Thomas Heinzig, 48,



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WESTERN WITNESS:

Swedish trainer-driver Rolf Hafvenstrom was his country's go-between across the Berlin Wall. “A socialist spirit was expected from Karlshorst's drivers,” he said.

EASTERN BLOODLINES

The top names in East German harness racing are largely unfamiliar to students of bloodlines living in the West.

“Solo, Lusen, Ritterstern, Virtuose, they were among the best horses at Karlshorst that I can recall,” said Thomas Heinzig, who was a veterinarian in East Berlin. “They were owned by VEBs (*Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft*), or agricultural collectives. Among the privately owned and trained were stars like Komet, Kadett and Kersten.”

Renowned stud farms, like those that Bruno Cassirer left in trusteeship with Charlie Mills (Lindenhof, Staffelde, Damsbruck), were expropriated by the state after 1945 (Damsbruck is now the training camp of world record holder in driving wins, Heinz Wewering).

The leading sire of the GDR was Stentor (b. 1957 by Allegretto). His dam, Stella Maris (by Muscletone) won the German Derby in 1943 and later stayed with the owner in East Germany. A dozen of his incompletely registered crops born between 1969 and 1981 earned more than €18,000, two (Marathon and Lennert) about €100,000 each. Even though the earnings data are fraught with a series of unrealistic currency exchange rates (rubles to ost-marks to d-marks to euro), they commanded respect as they were won in East Berlin, Moscow, Budapest and Prague.

Interestingly, the record kilometer times of Stentor's offspring over the years got stuck at about 1:20, or 2:08 mile rate. In comparison, the winning times in the national Swedish championship were cut from 1:19 to 1:15 (2:07 to 2:00 mile rate) between 1975-1984.

As late as 1988, the second edition of the GDR studbook was published, but new blood in the breeding barns was almost impossible to get.

“There were private breeders, too, with one or a couple head,” said Heinzig. “They owned farms slightly larger than regular house yards, and cut grass for fodder by hand along the roads in the vicinity.”

Stallions born in the USSR were available. However, if they were of good quality, like Sorrento (by Reprise), they were often sold off to Western Europe, most likely Finland. Unsurprisingly, it didn't help much to hold conferences on horse breeding, like the one in East Berlin in August 1979 when the Congress for Horse Breeding in the Socialist States was held. Genetics was a science practically banned in Eastern Europe; the effect of heredity and environment had been distorted by Soviet biologist Trofim Lysenko and his political doctrine.

It was out of the question to buy stallions with hard currency. Barter became the solution. “Take one, pay with two” was the inverted and devastating business concept of the planned economy of the East. For a stallion from West Berlin, breeders in East Berlin offered two mares.

Rolf Hafvenstrom was a broker of sorts who brought promising sires to East Germany, including the American-born Pursuit, by Nevele Pride and Swedish-born Up In Smoke, half brother to the 1984 Elitlopp winner The Onion.

But it was too little, too late. Their offspring came of racing age after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The market for yearlings out of “commie mares” imploded. Still, Up In Smoke's best performing progeny, Agamemnon (b. 1988), met the competition. He won every other race he entered, a stellar career considering his maternity five generations back originated with Peter The Great, born in 1895. Otherwise, Up In Smoke had an appropriate name for where he ended his days.



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Thomas Heinzig

RESOURCEFUL: Thomas Heinzig (in silks) and his groom, René Robl, started out at East Berlin's Karlshorst, where they tried to copy Western equipment, but rubber trotting boots were so rare they were treated like currency.

who worked as one of the state-licensed trainers at Karlshorst until the fall of the wall on Nov. 9, 1989.

Heinzig became a trainer, even though his was a family background without horses.

"I just loved animals as a kid, and as part of the job training program at school I did an internship at a zoo while aiming at becoming an apprentice at the track," he said. "As an apprentice—and of course as a professional trainer—one had to be a member of the party."

"Yes, I was club leader of the FDJ (*Freie Deutsche Jugend*, the youth branch of the party) at the track," he said, somewhat apologetically. "But no, I never invited comrade youth members to study tours of the track in the spirit and intent of the FDJ. It was useless. Trotting wasn't an Olympic event. [There were] no medals, no national anthems."

At any one time there were about 20 licenses available, with a waiting list for applicants, according to Heinzig. Schulz and Hafvenstrom do not doubt that some candidates were moved up the waiting list with the help of political connections; they had "high political schooling." That didn't win the hearts of the public, though.

“Wo warst Du, Manfred?" Hungarian amateur colleagues asked Schulz when he drove at the Budapest track. "We were in Copenhagen for a European amateur drivers' match, where were you?"

Hungarian drivers (and the occasional driver from Czechoslovakia) were allowed to participate in events in Western Europe. Schulz, with some difficulty, hides his feelings about never being allowed to test his talent outside Eastern Europe. Werner Bandermann, 10-time professional driving champion at Karlshorst, was never allowed to compete in the drivers' European Championship when held in Western Europe.

Budapest was the East German win-

dow on the world, an oasis, and a tack shop. Available for sale were tack, mineral supplements, and just about everything equine. Budapest was also where the East Germans got hold of old race cards from neighboring West Berlin.

"We just devoured old Mariendorf race programs, studied pedigrees, time records, purses, stats," said Schulz. "In the outbound transports to Budapest we stashed money in fodder sacks, then bought tack that was loaded around the horses for the homebound journey. Customs, if the officers cared at all, lost interest in checking if they had to crawl around the horses. Sometimes I took the plane to and from Budapest to free extra space for merchandise in the horse transports home."

Heinzig and René Robl, his stable groom at the time in East Berlin, remember how one tried to copy tack from the West by secretly contracting shoemakers and tailors to make copies with whatever material was at hand.

"But rubber boots, they could not be substituted; they were hard currency items," said Heinzig.

(Manfred Zwiener, who fled the GDR and won the 2000 drivers' European Championship, told *Die Zeit* how he used to make horse whips out of green branches as an apprentice at Karlshorst.)

It was a stunning moment when the Wall finally came down, according to those training and driving in the East.

"It took several weeks for the fall of the Wall to sink in for us; we could never believe it before it happened," said Heinzig. "Of course we realized that our horses would not meet the competition of West German horses. Average record times for East German horses were 4-6 seconds behind those in the West."

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